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Is participation in an English language immersion program detrimental to a student's knowledge of Japanese vocabulary?

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The Japanese Vocabulary Test (Hattori, 1989, 1990, 1997) was used as an index to determine whether the Japanese language development of English language immersion students at Katoh Gakuen, a private school in Numazu City, Japan has suffered as a result of the students spending at least half of their academic day studying in English. The immersion students of grades five, six and seven ($n=109$) were administered an abridged version of this standardized measure of Japanese vocabulary. As a reference, the same measure was given to students of the same grades from regular programs in public schools ($n=409$). The results showed that the scores for both the immersion and regular students increased with grade. The similarity in the pattern of scores casts doubt on the claim that participating in the English language immersion program could be detrimental to knowledge of Japanese vocabulary.

Key words: English language immersion, partial immersion, knowledge of Japanese vocabulary

Immersion education first began in the ethnically diverse province of Quebec, Canada in 1965. Although the official language of Quebec is French, at the time a large proportion of the English-speaking population was not able to speak French proficiently, placing them at a disadvantage socially and economically. Seeking to improve the way French was being taught as a second language, a group of native English speaking parents in St. Lambert, Quebec worked together with specialists in bilingualism from McGill University and created a new program in which a total French environment was introduced from kindergarten (see Lambert & Tucker, 1972). Later, the program was developed to continue on all the way through to high school and today, immersion programs can be found in all ten Canadian provinces. The intent of immersion is to develop bilingualism and biliteracy in majority-language students and, unlike traditional language education, immersion teaches language by conducting anywhere from 50 %-100 % of the regular curriculum

in the second language.

A Spanish immersion program was implemented in Los Angeles in the early 1970s based on the successful Canadian program (Cohen, 1974). Following the positive results of this program, immersion schools spread across North America, and there are now many target languages, including Chinese and Japanese. Met and Lorenz (1997) have presented an overview of lessons learned from twenty years of experience in U.S. immersion programs. To learn about the implementation of partial immersion programs in Japanese, Spanish and French in the United States, see Thomas, Virginia, & Abbott, (1993).

Katoh School (Katoh Gakuen) is a private school in Shizuoka Prefecture, and has Japan's only English partial immersion program. There are two types of programs, traditional classes that are taught in Japanese, and immersion classes where 50 % or more of the classes are taught in English. The curriculum of both programs is based on guidelines set forth by the Japanese Ministry of

Education. At the time of entrance, parents are able to choose between the two programs. The English immersion program was implemented in the elementary school in April 1992 with 28 students and at the time of this writing, that original pilot class was in their first year of high school, or grade ten. Katoh School created a unique partial immersion program where English learning is stressed in the early grades. The immersion program begins with about 75 % of the first three grades taught in English, and then gradually the proportion of classes in English drops to about 50 % in the upper grades. From junior high school the students are re-immersed, and classes in English account for 60 % of the curriculum. For a detailed review of the introduction of immersion to Japan and results of evaluations, see Bostwick (1995, 1998, 1999, 2000, in press), and Katoh (1993).

A popular misconception associated with the immersion approach—spending 50 % or more of the day studying through a foreign language—is that it may lead to deficits in mother tongue development. However, research on immersion education involving close language pairs has shown that the program has allowed students to remain academically competitive with their non-immersion peers while maintaining normal first language development (Cummins & Swain, 1986; Genesee, 1987). Cummins (1998) stressed that based on research concerning the academic, linguistic and intellectual effects of immersion, there were no negative consequences, and that in fact, the evidence suggests subtle benefits in these areas for bilingual children.

From its outset, one of the primary objectives of the St. Lambert project was to create a program where a second language was added at no cost to the maintenance and development of the first language (Lambert, 1975). In addition to attaining additive bilingualism, the program is also committed to promoting a positive attitude towards the child's own culture. Results of testing of students in the immersion program at Katoh have shown that the distance between the two languages has had no negative effect on the first language development of the students (Bostwick, in press). In this respect, the Katoh School has

provided the first evidence that additive bilingualism is attainable in Japan.

The structure of the Japanese language is, however, fundamentally different from English. Therefore it may not be surprising to learn that concerns persist over whether spending a great deal of each academic day in English could result in students falling behind their peers in normal Japanese language development. Although previous internal evaluations have demonstrated that the immersion students perform at least as well as Katoh School's non-immersion students on national Japanese (Kokugo) tests, new parents deciding between immersion and a regular program remain unconvinced (Bostwick, 1998). Therefore, it was determined that an external study, using a different measure of language proficiency, would contribute to the task of ascertaining whether the students' Japanese language development has been held back as a result of immersion. To this aim, a new index of the student's Japanese language development was administered, and in order to provide a reference, the test was also given to students from three regular schools.

Method

Participants

Immersion students from the English language immersion program at Katoh Elementary School represented grades five, six and seven ($n = 105$).

The reference group students were from three public schools in the Minato ward of Tokyo: grades five and six from T Elementary School ($n = 127$) and M Elementary School ($n = 110$), and grade seven from T Junior High School ($n = 167$).

Instrument

The Japanese Vocabulary Test (Hattori, 1989, 1990, 1997) is a standardized test for use with elementary and junior high school students in Japan. The test consists of a series of multiple-choice questions asking the student to choose the meaning of a word, word combination or expression. From the original 150 test questions, 50 questions were quasi-randomly selected from each level of difficulty. Classroom teachers administered the test

in December 1998. No special instructions were given.

Results

A one-way ANOVA analysis of the mean scores of the Japanese Vocabulary Test was carried out for both the immersion students and the students from the regular schools (Figure 1). The main effect for grade for the immersion students was significant ($F(2, 102) = 15.527$, $p < .001$). A post hoc test revealed significant differences between grades five and six, grades five and seven, and grades six and seven ($Mse = 16.051$). The main effect for grade for the regular students was also significant ($F(2, 400) = 18.466$, $p < .001$). A post hoc test revealed significant differences between grades five and six and grades five and seven ($Mse = 77.523$). (Figures 1 & 2).

These results show that the scores for both the immersion and regular students increased with grade, extending previous studies by Bostwick (1998, 1999, 2000) in which the English immersion students demonstrated high levels of competence in Japanese language development.

General Discussion

Although a direct statistical comparison of the Japanese vocabulary ability scores for the immersion students and regular students would be inappropriate given the fundamental differences between the two types of schools, the similarity in the pattern of scores would suggest that participating in the

English language immersion program has not been detrimental to the immersion student's knowledge of Japanese vocabulary.

However, before we can completely dismiss the claim that immersion is detrimental to the student's knowledge of Japanese vocabulary, there is one other aspect that needs to be addressed. It is possible that the detrimental effects of the immersion program are being negated by several supplemental classes a week in Japanese that are added in order to help prepare students to perform on state or national tests. Although it is impossible to gauge the influence of these extra classes on the students' Japanese vocabulary ability, one thing does seem apparent, the combination of the immersion approach plus the supplemental classes has resulted in a similar pattern of progress as that of the regular school students in the academic grades considered in this study.

Conclusion

With the intent of keeping up with a world community that is steadily becoming dominated by those proficient in spoken English, the Japanese Ministry of Education is currently introducing English language programs into all elementary schools (Downes & Sugihara 2000). However, a fierce debate continues between proponents and opponents over exact guidelines for the new programs and its potential negative effects on already overworked children (Takahashi, 2000). It is hoped that this study contributes both to the understanding of the effects of the immersion

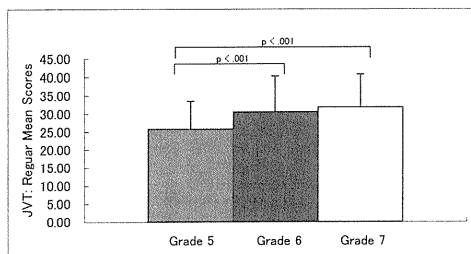


Fig. 1 Mean scores for the Japanese Vocabulary Test: Regular

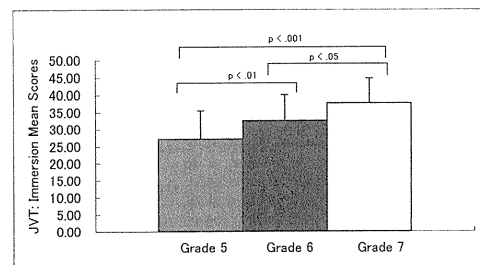


Fig. 2 Mean scores for the Japanese Vocabulary Test: Immersion

program in general, and more specifically to the small body of research on immersion programs involving very different languages.

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